

NICCO: Assisting social care professionals to support children of offenders



‘I’ve got social services...since I’ve engaged with them they’ve been really good.’

2.5x
more children
experience
parental
imprisonment
than are in care

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Who are we?

The National Information Centre on Children of Offenders – NICCO (formerly i-HOP) is a service that supports professionals to work effectively with offenders' children and families. NICCO collates and promotes examples of services, interventions, resources, policy and research around this vulnerable group.

Barnardo's was originally commissioned by the **Department for Education** in 2013 to develop this service as an online information hub with a focus on England (www.nicco.org.uk). The service is targeted at all professionals who come into contact with offenders' children and their families, from various sectors including education, health and social care as well as the criminal justice system.

* It is estimated that there are 200,000 children affected by parental imprisonment in England and Wales (MoJ, 2012). In 2012 it was reported that there were 72,775 children in care in England and Wales (NSPCC, 2012).

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“We was there when he got locked up.”

7 year old girl

It is estimated that there are **200,000 children a year** that experience the imprisonment of a parent in England and Wales.¹ Research increasingly shows the impact that parental imprisonment can have on these children – **poorer outcomes, stigma, isolation, health and financial difficulties**. However there is currently no routine identification of who these children are and therefore no way of ensuring their needs are met.

Children, families and parental offending

“It’s not just the prisoner that’s punished is it? It’s the whole family.” Mother

- Prisoners’ families are vulnerable to poverty, debt, housing instability and physical illness²
- 25% of children of prisoners are at a higher risk of mental ill health³
- Research has shown that 65% of boys aged under 10 with a father in prison went on to offend⁴
- More children are affected by parental imprisonment each year than are Looked After.⁵

The disadvantage and stigma that children and families often experience can mean they do not seek help or let professionals know when a parent goes to prison. Services that are unaware of the scale of parental imprisonment will not know to ask families if they face this issue and need support. Given this, and the lack of systematic identification, these children and families can be left isolated, and not engaged with any services.

Social care and parental offending

“I’ve got social services. They help...since I’ve engaged with them they’ve been really good.”

Mother

As well as the many negative outcomes associated with parental offending outlined above, these families may also face other complex challenges such as drug use, mental health problems and domestic abuse.⁶ Therefore, it is likely that social care professionals are already working with, or needs assessing, many of these children and families. Furthermore, when a parent goes to prison children may become Looked After or privately fostered, particularly when a mother is imprisoned. However, needs associated with parental offending may go unnoticed, especially if the family do not meet other social care thresholds.

It is therefore essential for social care professionals to receive relevant training, in order to: develop an understanding about the associated needs,



increase awareness about why it is important to ask and talk about parental imprisonment in a non-judgmental way and enable workers to respond appropriately to this issue. The central role social workers often play in families’ lives, mean they are well placed to signpost and refer families to targeted agencies and provide specialist information and age-appropriate resources.

If stepping down a case, for example to Early Help, social workers can ensure there is good understanding of the issue of parental offending. Social workers may also be in a position to promote meaningful contact between imprisoned parents and children, where this is in the best interests of the child. This may be particularly important for Looked After Children (LAC) and privately fostered children, and the impact of parental offending should be considered when carrying out LAC Reviews.

Social care teams can also be key in terms of appropriately sharing information, and ensuring effective partnership working between statutory and other services. Established communication channels and referral routes between social care and criminal justice agencies (such as prisons, police, probation and courts) are essential in order to ensure effective joined up working and prevent children and families’ needs from going unnoticed. A recent inspection report into Probation Trusts’ work to protect children and young people found that whilst probation staff did not always fully understand their multi-agency child protection role, social care also did not always understand the Offender Manager’s role.⁷

How can NICCO support social care professionals?

“They [social care] keep me from going mad basically...They keep me above ground if you like, they’re very good.” Mother

There is a growing national, strategic recognition of this group of children and families. Working Together to Safeguard Children suggests that the ‘children in need’ assessment process should also be used when a child has a parent in prison.⁸ Ofsted in 2013 identified children of offenders as a potential target group for Children’s Centres, with needs requiring additional support.⁹ Troubled families teams are required to focus on children affected by parental offending.¹⁰ Furthermore, through the funding of NICCO, the Department for Education have recognised that professionals should be able to respond to these specific and complex needs.

Examples of existing practice

The Family Advice and Support Team (FAST) in **HMP Onley** and local social care teams work closely together. When a family has a parent in the prison, professionals from both services work on CAFs, case conferences and post adoption processes. FAST also help to facilitate communication between social care and prisoners.

Action for Prisoners’ and Offenders’ Families have produced a factsheet for social workers detailing some of the impacts of parental offending and practical ways to work with these families. It also contains links to useful children’s resources, organisations and training resources.

“All we want as a family is just to know what to do, how to go about things because we don’t know. Nobody tells you anything.” Mother

NICCO is a national one stop information and advice service for all professionals working with children and families of offenders. It brings together information that can support social care professionals in working with children and families affected by parental offending:

- **resources** for children and families and for professionals to use directly with children
- details of **local and national services** to signpost families to, that work specifically with children and families of offenders
- details of local **training for professionals**
- up to date, national and local **policy frameworks, government guidance and recommendations** about this group of families
- **guidelines and toolkits** to support

- professionals to work with these families, and to assist in developing setting-wide practice
- **research** into the impact of imprisonment on children and families

NICCO recognises that social care professionals work in a busy environment with demands on their time. NICCO puts all the resources in one place so help and information is there when it’s needed.

Notes:

Children’s and parents’ quotes are taken from interviews with children and families in two Barnardo’s reports:

Owen Gill, *Every night you cry: Case studies of 15 Bristol families with a father in prison*, Barnardo’s, 2009

Owen Gill, *She just cries and cries: Case studies of Devon families with a father in prison*, Barnardo’s, 2010

References:

- 1 Williams et al, *Prisoners’ childhood and family backgrounds: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal cohort study of prisoners*, Ministry of Justice, 2012
- 2 Rowntree Smith R, Grimshaw R, Romeo R, Knapp M, *Poverty and disadvantage among prisoner’s families*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007
- 3 Jones et al, *COPING: Children of Prisoners, Interventions & Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health*, 2013
- 4 Joseph Murray, David P. Farrington, Ivana Sekol, Rikke F. Olsen, *Effects of parental imprisonment on child antisocial behaviour and mental health: a systematic review*, Campbell Systematic Reviews 2009:4, 2009
- 5 MoJ (2012) estimate that there are 200,000 children affected by parental imprisonment in England and Wales, whilst NSPCC reported that there were 72,775 children in care in England and Wales in 2012.
- 6 See, for example, Bromley Briefings for statistics demonstrating high prevalence of complex needs amongst prisoners. Prison Reform Trust, *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile*, 2014
- 7 HM Inspectorate of Probation, *An Inspection of the work of Probation Trusts and Youth Offending Teams to protect children and young people*, August 2014
- 8 Department for Education, *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*, March 2013
- 9 Ofsted, *Children’s centre inspection handbook for inspections from April 2013*, March 2013
- 10 Department for communities and local government, *Troubled Families Programme*, 2011

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